

Europe court to rule if quadriplegic has right to die

June 4 2015

Europe's human rights court will decide on Friday if a man in a vegetative state can be taken off life support in a case that ignited a fierce euthanasia debate in France.

Vincent Lambert, who is in his late 30s, was left severely brain damaged and quadriplegic as a result of a 2008 road accident and has for months been at the centre of a judicial tug-of-war over his right to die.

His wife Rachel, who like him is a psychiatric nurse, has said he would never have wanted to be kept alive artificially, and that she wanted to "let him go".

The legal drama began in January 2014, when Lambert's doctors, backed by his wife and six of his eight siblings, decided to stop the intravenous food and water keeping him alive in line with a 2005 passive euthanasia law in France.

However, his deeply devout Catholic parents, half-brother and sister won an urgent court application to stop the plan.

In an appeal, the French supreme administrative court, known as the State Council, ordered three doctors to draw up a report on Lambert's condition and in June ruled that the decision to withdraw care from a man with no hope of recovery was lawful.

Lambert's parents then took the case to the Strasbourg-based European

Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which ordered France to keep Lambert alive while they decided whether the State Council's decision was in line with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Laurent Pettiti, a lawyer for Lambert's wife, said that if the rights court quashes the State Council ruling, it would be impossible to stop intravenous nourishment and their legal options run out.

Rachel Lambert told AFP in an earlier interview that her husband would "never have wanted to be kept in this state."

"Keeping him alive artificially, it is unbearable compared to the man he was."

'Stop this madness'

But to his parents, stopping treatment would be tantamount to euthanasia. They believe he simply requires better care and want him moved to another clinic.

"I hope the ECHR will be able to stop this madness. Vincent is not at the end of his life, he is handicapped," his mother Viviane Lambert told AFP in January.

"They are trying to make us say we don't want him to go, but it is not at all the case, we don't want him to be snuffed out," said the staunch Catholic who insists her faith has nothing to do with her efforts to keep her son alive.

Bernard Jeanblanc, the head doctor at the Strasbourg clinic where Lambert's parents want him moved, said the patient was "not in a [vegetative state](#)" but had a degree of consciousness which enabled him to interact with his environment.

Euthanasia is illegal in France but Francois Hollande pledged in his 2012 presidential campaign to look into the issue.

In March lawmakers voted overwhelmingly in favour of a law allowing medics to place terminally-ill patients into a deep sleep until they die.

The law also makes "living wills"—drafted by people who do not want to be kept alive artificially if they are too ill to decide—legally binding on doctors.

However Health Minister Marisol Touraine has been steadfast in her refusal to legalise euthanasia and an amendment to the law allowing "medical assistance to die" was rejected.

Assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg as well as in the US states of Vermont, Oregon and Washington.

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